

## **APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE**

### **The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Mystic Aquarium**

#### **Testimony Before the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut State Legislature**

#### **H.B. No. 5037: AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2023.**

**February 16, 2022**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on behalf of The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Mystic Aquarium. First, on behalf of both institutions, we express our sincere appreciation to the Committee, to the General Assembly and to the Governor for the financial support that we each have received in the past; it has been vital to our organizations and to the communities which we serve.

The impact of the pandemic remains harsh on our institutions. Even in recent months, with the onset of the Omicron variant of COVID-19, we saw attendance decrease, and looking forward, we still face numerous uncertainties as a result of the lingering pandemic. Notwithstanding the negative impacts of the pandemic, we must always keep our facilities operating and staff employed to ensure that the animals in our collections have the care that they need. As a result, our expenses remain largely fixed, regardless of our revenues.

The funding levels in HB 5037 for Mystic Aquarium and The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk are level with what was approved by the General Assembly last year and provided in the Governor's budget for this year. We greatly appreciate the additional federal ARPA funding for our institutions that was appropriated in last year's budget and is continued in this year's budget. This continued support has been instrumental to our institutions given the unique circumstances in which we still find the state and the nation, and we are here to voice our support for these vitally important appropriations.

As the State continues to recover from the pandemic, restore economic activity, and put people back to work, Mystic Aquarium and The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk have contributed to this recovery in many ways, especially in jumpstarting the State's \$16 billion travel, tourism and hospitality sector of the economy. The Aquariums are anchors for restaurants, hotels, and retail shops. In fact, pre-pandemic, 1,250,000 people visited the two aquariums on average every year, more than any other set of attractions in the State, combined. We saw similarly high numbers of tourists returning to our institutions through the Governor's *Summer at the Museum* initiative this past summer, which underscored that, coming out of the pandemic, the aquariums continue to serve as strong economic drivers for tourism, and catalysts for economic recovery and growth.

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Mystic Aquarium are the primary economic engines for Connecticut's tourism industry. Over 60% of Mystic Aquarium's visitors and almost 40% of The Maritime Aquarium's visitors are from out-of-state, which means that these visitors eat at restaurants, shop in local stores, buy gasoline in Connecticut and stay overnight, all major contributions to Connecticut state revenue. More than 1,730 jobs were directly dependent upon

both institutions prior to the pandemic, and with State support, both institutions have been able to revert to nearly full employment at this pre-pandemic level.

Our rationale for continued support can be summarized as follows:

- The pandemic has hit both institutions very hard, as operating costs remain high to care for animals, while revenue from gate attendance diminished drastically, and remains volatile and unpredictable through the continuation of the pandemic;
- Both institutions are essential to restoring Connecticut's tourism sector including restaurants, hotels, gas stations and retail establishments that depend upon tourism;
- The aquariums have increased their commitment to STEM education for Connecticut students during the pandemic through extensive virtual programming while schools were closed, remedial STEM programs last year as students returned to school, and now, as STEM education is prioritized for underserved and underrepresented communities;
- The two aquariums are essential public assets that return significant investment to the local and state economy;
- Spending on state marketing, including dedicated funding for the two aquariums, correlates to growth in visits to the state, hotel occupancy, and economic growth at the local level. This is a key fact for consideration as the State seeks to restore its economy to full capacity.

The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and Mystic Aquarium, working cooperatively, focus on education programs related to Long Island Sound and other ocean environments that bring inquiry-based science learning to over 300,000 young students each year (pre-pandemic), with particular attention paid to lower income districts, where excellent science instruction is needed more than ever in a state with the largest achievement gap in the nation. In fact, we provide essential STEM learning curriculum and activities to every school district in the State.

The provision of high-quality STEM programs has never been more critical for students who had limited access to learning resources because of school closures during the pandemic, and even now struggle as schools have re-opened but the dynamics remain difficult. The aquariums offered teachers, students, and parents extensive online learning resources even as our admission revenues and revenues from school groups and classes were greatly diminished. And as schools re-opened, we offered remedial education opportunities and new experiences for students. For example, The Maritime Aquarium partnered with Norwalk Public Schools to offer summer school to every eligible child K through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, about 750 students.

Evaluations of educational programs at both institutions show that our STEM programs are working in teaching core STEM skills, engaging students with much needed experiences, getting young people outdoors, away from their computers, and engaged in conservation activities.

Both institutions play a critical role in the protection of Long Island Sound. Mystic Aquarium is involved in rescuing and rehabilitating marine mammals, birds, and other sea creatures, leading this effort not only in Long Island Sound but throughout New England. At Mystic Aquarium, a major research laboratory studies the health of marine mammals and is involved in exploring the correlation between marine animal health and human health issues. In

Norwalk, The Maritime Aquarium's permanent exhibits focus primarily on Long Island Sound. Its biodiversity database monitors species trends and collects data on 125 species, and its water quality surveys are among the longest-running such surveys for Long Island Sound.

Aquariums are special and unique enterprises. They are a rare type of institution, with only a few such institutions in the United States, precisely because of their complexity. The care for living marine animals and plants, including endangered and threatened species, requires specially trained staff and expertise, consistent high-quality food and medical supplies, complicated life support systems and continuous operation of pumps, filtration systems, heaters and chillers. And it is this complexity that makes them a favorite attraction for the public, and a powerful driver of economic growth. In fact, The Maritime Aquarium was built expressly to spur the redevelopment of South Norwalk in the 1980s, a very successful endeavor that has transformed a formerly blighted neighborhood to one of the region's most dynamic urban centers, and attracted \$335 million in private development funds.

Historically, we have served as good financial stewards of state funding, consistently leveraging our annual support by insuring a positive return on the state's investment to Connecticut and its municipalities. Both institutions are committed to using state funds to drive economic development, for advertising and marketing aimed at attracting tourism, and for support of educational programs benefiting nearly every child in Connecticut.

The funding for the two institutions provided by the General Assembly in the budget adopted last session, and in the Governor's bill before you now, recognizes the important roles that each of our institutions play. This evening, we stand together, both in our request to maintain this level of funding, and in our gratitude for your support during these unprecedented times.

Thank you for the opportunity to present tonight.